ORIGINAL CONCEPT
AKUMI AGITOGI
(Fujimi L Bunko/KADOKAWA)

ART
RITO KOHSAKA

CHARACTER DESIGN
TSUKIHO TSUKIOKA

MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

4

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TLINK

ちりーん

MEEEN

MEEEN

WHICH MEANS YOUR SHOULDERS WILL NATURALLY HUNCH OVER.

AND THAT MAKES YOU SEEM GLOOMY.

EVEN THOUGH I THINK IT'S KIND OF CUTE.

YOU TEND TO HANG YOUR HEAD, MIYO, WHICH MEANS YOU'RE ALWAYS LOOKING AT THE FLOOR.

Chapter 21: A Match for the Master

YOU DON'T WANT TO SEEM GLOOMY AT ONE.

A PARTY IS A SOCIAL OCCASION.

YES! THAT'S A GOOD START, MIYO.

OKAY!

JUMP

KEEP YOUR BACK UPRIGHT.

BE SURE TO HOLD YOUR CHEST OUT AND ROLL YOUR SHOULDERS BACK.

JUST CHANGING YOUR POSTURE WILL MAKE YOU SEEM SO MUCH MORE OPEN.

YOUR POSTURE MAKES IT SEEM LIKE YOU HAVE NO CONFIDENCE, WHICH IS WHY WE'RE STARTING THERE.

THANK YOU SO MUCH.

I'LL LET YOU BORROW THIS MIRROR. ALWAYS BE CHECKING!

BLUSH

ALL RIGHT!

BEAM

A SMALL SMILE IS ENOUGH. LIFT THE EDGES OF YOUR MOUTH AND YOUR BROWS.

IF YOU'RE CHATTING WITH SOMEONE AND THEY START TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND...

...JUST SMILE AND NOD!

HMM...

WAS THAT BAD?

GRIMACE

...TRY THINKING OF WHAT IT'S LIKE WHEN YOU SMILE AT SOMEONE YOU CARE FOR.

A LITTLE MORE NATURAL.

LIKE...

SOMEONE I CARE FOR?

SMILE

...PERFECT.

OH MY!

THAT'S...

HOW DID SHE KNOW I WAS THINKING OF HIM?

O-OKAY.

?

HRRM...

PRETEND LIKE YOU'RE SMILING AT YURIE INSTEAD OF KIYOKA.

TOO PERFECT, ACTUALLY. YOU MIGHT GET SUITORS YOU DON'T WANT.

FLIP

BZZ BZZ BZZ

THANK YOU SO MUCH.

TAKE CARE.

BUT I MUST DO WHAT I CAN SO I CAN BE A SUITABLE WIFE FOR LORD KUDO.

BEING A GENTLEWOMAN ISN'T EASY.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, SISTER DEAREST?

NO ONE WILL ACKNOWLEDGE SOMEONE WHO'S ONLY NOBLE ON PAPER.

IT'S MUCH TOO LATE FOR YOU TO LEARN ANYTHING NEW.

ARE YOU *STUDYING*?

WOULDN'T IT BE EASIER IF YOU JUST ENDED YOUR LIFE?

EVERYTHING YOU'RE DOING IS POINTLESS.

THIS IS—

THIS IS A DREAM!

NO!

WHP

LADY MIYO.

SIGH

WOOM

THEY ARE RIGHT.

THINGS HAVE BEEN SO DIFFICULT FOR YOU.

HAZUKI?

YURIE?

MIYO.

GRAB

IF I KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN...

LORD KUDO...

I'D JOLT

...THEN I WOULD HAVE NEVER ALLOWED YOU THE CHANCE TO STUDY.

WHEEZE

WHEEZ

CHRRRP

CHRRRP

CHRRRP

HUFF ...

HUFF ...

SHUDDER

A DREAM.

CHRRRP

BUT...

IT WAS A DREAM.

WOULDN'T IT BE EASIER IF YOU JUST ENDED YOUR LIFE?

EVERYTHING YOU'RE DOING IS POINTLESS.

I WOULD HAVE NEVER ALLOWED YOU THE CHANCE TO STUDY.

THAT FEELING OVERWHELMS ME EVERY MORNING.

SLIP

SHIVER

THUD

AH!

LORD KUDO KNOWS WHY I WANT TO STUDY.

GRIP

HE UNDERSTANDS.

...

HE WOULD NEVER SAY SUCH A THING.

MY DREAMS WILL NOT KEEP ME DOWN.

HAVE A GOOD DAY.

MEEEN

MEEEN

MIYO...

ALL RIGHT.

JUST PLEASE, DON'T PUSH YOURSELF.

I WILL.

I WILL BE BACK IN THE EVENING, BUT WILL LEAVE AGAIN AFTER THAT.

THE PALLOR ON HER FACE GROWS BY THE DAY.

IT MUST BE HER CONSTANT NIGHTMARES.

HM? IS SOMETHING THE MATTER...

...MY LORD?

I ASK YOU DO THE SAME.

MIYO.

IF SHE WILL NOT ADMIT TO IT, THEN SO BE IT.

I WILL BELIEVE HER AND KEEP AN EYE ON HER.

NOTHING.

BUT I CAN CLEARLY TELL...

...SHE'S BEING MINDFUL OF ME.

...

NOD

GLANCE

I'M OFF.

ALL RIGHT.

WESTERN SILVERWARE CAN BE QUITE LOUD. BE CAREFUL.

AND ELBOWS IN.

ALL RIGHT.

WHOA

DON'T LET THE WEIGHT OF THE DRINK TIP YOUR GLASS OVER.

A-ALL RIGHT ...

TRY NOT TO DRINK ALCOHOL AT THE PARTY.

MISTAKES CAN HAPPEN IF YOU CAN'T HOLD YOUR DRINK.

I'M EXPECTING YOUR BEST TODAY...

...MIYO.

MEEEEN

MEEEEN

MEEEEN

OF COURSE!

I AM MIYO SAIMORI, KIYOKA KUDO'S FIANCÉE.

SELF-INTRO-DUC-TION

DON'T GIVE THEM A CHANCE!

I'M ACTUALLY ON MY WAY TO MEET SOMEONE RIGHT NOW.

HEE HEE

STRAN-GERS ON THE STREET

GOOD EVENING.

BONSOIR.

GUTEN ABEND.

WĂNSHÀNG HĂO.

BON

SWA?

FOR-EIGN GREET-INGS

YEAH.

YOU'VE BEEN STUDYING SO HARD, LADY MIYO.

BUT PLEASE, DON'T PUSH YOURSELF.

YOU'RE LOOKING SO PALE TOO.

PHEW.

MEEN

MEEEEN

I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY NOTICED.

DO I REALLY LOOK THAT BAD?

I'M DOING ALL RIGHT.

I'M NOT.

YOU'RE SUCH A FAST LEARNER, MIYO. YOU'RE SUCH A JOY TO TEACH.

HEE HEE

MY! I'M HAPPY TO HEAR THAT.

I AM TRULY ALL RIGHT.

I REALLY ENJOY MY STUDIES.

ARE YOU SURE?

YOU SHOULD STOP IF YOU'RE TIRED.

...WHY DON'T WE PUT WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED TO PRACTICE IN TOWN?

WHAT?

OH, I KNOW.

WE COULD USE A CHANGE OF PACE. WHILE IT'S A BIT SOON...

BUT THERE'S ONLY A MONTH AND A HALF UNTIL THE PARTY.

I CAN'T LET FEAR GET TO ME NOW.

WE COULD GO THIS AFTER-NOON... OR NOT.

IN FRONT OF... OTH-ERS ?!

I'M NOT READY FOR THIS...

THEN I'M COMING TOO!

HEE HEE. TO TOWN IT IS, THEN!

?!

WE'VE GOT TO DOLL YOU UP, MIYO!

DOLL ME...

...UP...

NO. WE CAN GO THIS AFTERNOON.

I'M DOING THIS TO BE THE PERFECT WIFE FOR LORD KUDO.

I'M READY.

IT'S ALWAYS SO MUCH HOTTER IN TOWN, ISN'T IT?

MURMUR

MURMUR

MURMUR

TLINK

Ices

MURMUR

MURMUR

MURMUR

SZZZ

SZZZ

HUMID

I NEED TO MIND MY POSTURE AND THE LOOK ON MY FACE...

HELLO.

WOULD YOU MIND IF I BROWSED WHAT YOU HAVE ON OFFER?

TAK-TAK-TAK

PLEASE DO. WELCOME.

WHY DON'T YOU TAKE A LOOK AROUND IN THAT STORE FIRST?

OKAY, MIYO!

Haberdashery

O-OKAY.

I FEEL BAD FOR ALWAYS BORROWING YURIE'S.

NO, I'M LOOKING FOR POWDER AND LIPSTICK FOR MYSELF.

はい

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A GIFT?

IT'S BEAUTIFUL.

THANK YOU.

THEN HOW ABOUT THIS?

WELL DONE!

YOU'RE DOING SPLENDIDLY!

YOUR PRACTICE IS CERTAINLY PAYING OFF.

PHEW

THANK YOU SO MUCH.

HER ENCOURAGING WORDS DO MAKE ME HAPPY.

I CAN'T COMPLAIN ABOUT THIS.

I COULD NOT BE LORD KUDO'S WIFE IF I DID.

DRIP

BUT I CAN TELL...

...YOU'RE GOING PAST YOUR LIMITS. YOU LOOK AWFULLY PALE.

I'M NOT...

WE CAN'T HAVE YOU FALLING SICK BEFORE THE PARTY.

DON'T TRY TO GO TOO FAST.

MIYO!

THP

I'M...

...ALL...

STAGGER

STEADY.

THUD

3.
WAIT

WHAT A GENTLE FRAGRANCE.

...BUT IT'S DIFFERENT FROM LORD KUDO'S.

THE SCENT OF COLOGNE...

I-I'M SO SORRY!

WHP

I SPACED OUT AND BOTHERED A STRANGER!

GRIP

PEEK

IT'S ALL RIGHT. LOOK AT ME.

CHESTNUT HAIR WITH A SLIGHT WAVE, NEATLY ARRANGED.

WHITE DRESS SHIRT, NECKTIE, WAISTCOAT.

MEDIUM HEIGHT, SLENDER BUILD.

I WONDER IF HE WORKS AROUND HERE.

GASP

OH, THANK YOU.

HERE YOU GO.

AND FROM ME AS WELL.

NO, I WAS NOT PAYING ATTENTION.

I'M FINE.

YOU HAVE MY DEEPEST APOLO-GIES.

I'M JUST GLAD TO SEE YOU UNHURT.

OH, IT WAS NO TROUBLE AT ALL.

I'M PERFECTLY ALL RIGHT. YOU DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT ME AT ALL.

SWF

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR CATCHING HER.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE IF YOU HAD NOT BEEN PASSING BY RIGHT THEN.

I MESSED UP.

I CAUSED PROBLEMS FOR BOTH HAZUKI AND A STRANGER.

PLEASE TAKE CARE IN THIS HEAT.

NOW, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME.

HM?

I WONDER WHO THAT WAS.

HE HAS TO BE THE SON OF A NOBLE.

I MEAN, HIS CLOTHES WERE SO FINELY TAILORED.

AND HE CARRIED HIMSELF SO WELL.

OH, N-NO, THAT WAS NOTHING...

YOU OKAY, MIYO?!

YOU'RE NOT HURT, ARE YOU?

RIGHT. ANYWAY!

WHIP

IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO YOU, I...

OH, I'M SO RELIEVED!

LADY MIYO?

LADY HAZUKI?

N-NO, YOU DIDN'T!

I JUST STUMBLED BECAUSE I DIDN'T NOTICE—

ALL OF THIS IS MY FAULT!

I BROUGHT YOU OUT INTO THE HEAT WITHOUT THINKING OF YOUR HEALTH!

...I NEED TO TELL THE BOTH OF YOU.

ゴゴゴ RRR

ゴ RMBL ゴ

THERE IS SOME-THING...

AND YOU WILL LISTEN TO ME, WON'T YOU?

!! SMILE

AND LADY MIYO, TAKE BETTER CARE OF YOURSELF.

YOU WILL SHORTEN HER STUDY HOURS.

WHAT POINT IS THERE IF SHE FAINTS FROM WORKING TOO HARD?!

"I'M SORRY"

YES, MA'AM.

YES—

AND EVEN A STRANGER.

SHUNK

BUT I ONLY ENDED UP TROUBLING BOTH HAZUKI AND YURIE.

ALL MY NEGATIVE DREAMS CAUSED ME TO PANIC.

NEE
NEE
NEE

...ISN'T EASY.

SIGH

BECOMING A SUITABLE WIFE FOR LORD KUDO...

HEE
HEE

BUT I'LL BE PERFECTLY HAPPY...

...SO LONG AS I KEEP IMPROVING, BIT BY BIT.

VRRRM

OH!

I GOT SOME PEARS IN TOWN TODAY.

I HOPE HE LIKES THEM.

LORD KUDO!

WELCOME HOME.

SHFIP

MEEEEEN

MEEEEEN

Chapter 22: Arata Tsuruki

SIGH

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE BURIAL GROUNDS ONLY HEIGHTENED THE LOAD ON MY UNIT.

ALL WHILE THEY MAINTAIN THEIR NORMAL DAY-TO-DAY DUTIES.

MY MEN HAVE BEEN TAKING SHIFTS EVERY NIGHT TO PATROL AND QUESTION.

IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT ONE DAY, THOSE VENGEFUL SPIRITS MAY ATTACK THE LIVING.

A GREAT NUMBER OF GIFTED SOULS NEVER FIND PEACE AND REMAIN ON THE GROUNDS.

AND NOW I SPEND FEWER AND FEWER HOURS AT HOME.

REPORT REVIEW TAKES UP ALL OF MY TIME AS IT IS.

I'M WORRIED ABOUT MIYO.

NIGHTMARES CONTINUE TO PLAGUE HER EVERY NIGHT.

I HAVE AN INFORMANT LOOKING INTO THE USUBA FAMILY.

BUT HE HAS YET TO FIND ANY USEFUL INFORMATION.

WHILE I SUSPECT IT MAY HAVE TO DO WITH THE USUBA GIFT...

...I HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO COMBAT IT.

IT'S ALMOST TIME TO RECEIVE MORE INVESTIGATION RESULTS.

I HOPE THEY'VE FOUND SOME SORT OF CLUE THIS TIME.

AND MIYO HERSELF WON'T SAY ANYTHING.

SIGH

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.

BUT AS I WATCH HER GET WEAKER AND WEAKER BY THE DAY...

...I START TO WORRY THAT SHE WILL SIMPLY VANISH.

MIYO...

KNOCK
KNOCK

HE'S HERE, CAPTAIN.

THAT GUY THE MINISTRY OF THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD SENT ABOUT THE BURIAL GROUNDS STUFF.

HELLO, MAJOR KUDO.

I AM ARATA TSURUKI.

ARATA TSURUKI.

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OLD.

HE HAS GOOD LOOKS.

AN AMIABLE SMILE THAT LOWERS THE GUARD.

HE WEARS FINE SUITS WITH NATURAL EASE.

THE OVERALL IMPRES-SION IS NOT BAD.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, THE COMPANY RAN INTO AN ECONOMIC SLUMP AND ALMOST WENT BANKRUPT.

THEY HAVE SINCE REESTABLISHED THEMSELVES AND HAVE STABILIZED AS A MID-SIZE TRADING COMPANY.

THE TSURUKI FAMILY OWNS A TRADING COMPANY— TSURUKI TRADING.

IT'S RELATIVELY NEW, FOUNDED AFTER THE RESTORATION.

Tsuruki Trading

ARATA TSURUKI IS THE HEIR OF THE TSURUKI FAMILY. THERE IS NOTHING SUSPECT ABOUT HIM.

I HAVE LOOKED INTO THEM INDEPENDENT OF THE INFORMATION GIVEN TO ME BY MAJOR GENERAL OKAITO.

I CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY THEY HAVE DISPATCHED HIM.

HE IS NOT A PART OF THE MINISTRY OF THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD.

EXCEPT ONE THING—

PERHAPS IT'S BECAUSE THAT KNOWL-EDGE INFORMED MY OPINION.

NOTHING ABOUT HIM SHOULD LEAVE A BAD IMPRES-SION, BUT...

...IT'S ODD.

SOMETHING ABOUT HIM DOESN'T QUITE ADD UP.

I AM KIYOKA KUDO.

CAPTAIN OF THE ANTI-GRO-TESQUERIE UNIT.

I AM AWARE.

YOU'RE WELL KNOWN IN SOCIETY.

THEY SAY YOU ALLOW NO WOMEN CLOSE.

AND THAT YOU'RE AS COLD AS EARTH FROZEN SOLID.

PARDON ME.

ENOUGH CHIT-CHAT.

...

I LOOK FORWARD TO OUR BUSINESS TOGETHER.

I WILL BE ACTING AS LIAISON IN THIS MATTER.

I AM A NEGOTIATOR BY PROFESSION.

IF I MAY, YOU'RE NOT A MEMBER OF THE MINISTRY.

WOULD YOU MIND TELLING ME HOW YOU CAME TO BE HERE?

NOT AT ALL. YOU MUST BE WONDERING.

WHILE MY MAIN LINE OF WORK IS NEGOTIATING FOR MY FAMILY'S COMPANY...

...ACQUAINTANCES OCCASIONALLY ASK ME TO NEGOTIATE ON THEIR BEHALF.

MY SOLE ROLE IS TO GIVE VOICE TO CONCERNS THEY FIND HARD TO TALK ABOUT.

ARE YOU QUITE FAMILIAR WITH THE BURIAL GROUNDS AND THE GIFTED, THEN?

...

I SEE.

TALKS WILL COME TO A SWIFT END IF THE OTHER PARTY FINDS YOU IGNORANT ON A MATTER.

COMING OFF AS WELL-INFORMED IS PART OF MY JOB.

YES, THAT RIGHT THERE IS THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL NEGOTIATION.

THE MINISTRY OF THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD IS LOOKING INTO THE MATTER.

THEY HAVE YET TO FIND THE CULPRIT, HOWEVER.

IT WAS TWO WEEKS AGO...

...THAT THE BURIAL GROUNDS WERE UNSEALED. IT HAPPENED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

THE MINISTRY'S SORCERERS HAVE THEIR HANDS FULL.

SO THE ELITES FINALLY UNDERSTAND THE GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION.

THE MINISTRY HAS BEEN VERY TIGHT-LIPPED THUS FAR.

WHY HAVE THEY DECIDED TO TALK TO US NOW?

THEY'VE CERTAINLY TAKEN THEIR TIME.

SIGH

PEOPLE'S LIVES ARE AT STAKE HERE.

WE WILL HELP.

THANK YOU.

YOU MAY SEE IT THAT WAY IF YOU LIKE.

AND NOW THEY ASK FOR OUR ASSISTANCE.

DOES THAT MEAN THEY'VE GIVEN UP ON RESOLVING THIS DISCREETLY?

DESTROYING THEM IN COMBAT WITH GIFTS IS PERMITTED.

TWO-THIRDS OF THE SPIRITS WHO WANDERED OUT HAVE BEEN COLLECTED BY MINISTRY SORCERERS.

MANY OF THE ONES STILL AT LARGE ARE AGGRESSIVE VENGEFUL SPIRITS, WHICH ARE PROVING MORE DIFFICULT.

UNDER-STOOD.

IN FACT, IT WAS HIS MAJESTY THE EMPEROR WHO RECOMMENDED THAT.

SPIRITS THAT LINGER IN THIS WORLD FOREVER ONLY POSE DANGER.

...IT IS THE LIVES OF THE LIVING THAT MATTER MOST.

WHILE GIFTED SPIRITS...

...INCLUDE THOSE OF OUR ANCESTORS ...

IT COMES AS NO SURPRISE THAT THE EMPEROR ORDERED THEIR DESTRUCTION.

THANK YOU.

HERE ARE YOUR WRITTEN ORDERS.

MAJOR GENERAL OKAITO HAS ALREADY SIGNED OFF ON IT.

AH, THAT'S RIGHT, MAJOR KUDO.

THIS CONCLUDES MY BUSINESS TODAY.

IS IT TRUE THAT YOU'VE GOTTEN ENGAGED?

YOU'RE QUITE THE TALK OF THE TOWN RECENTLY.

I'M QUITE JEALOUS.

I'M HOPING TO SETTLE DOWN TOO.

BUT I HAVEN'T MANAGED IT YET.

I HAVE.

MARRIAGE
...

IRK

...ISN'T
EASY.

...MAJOR KUDO.

GRIP

BEST OF LUCK TO YOU...

I'LL BE SEEING YOU.

ARATA TSURUKI...

I CANNOT SAY WHY, BUT I CAN'T SHAKE MY IMPRESSION OF HIM AS ODD AND SOMEHOW INCONSISTENT.

AND I HAVE TO UNDERTAKE SUCH A MAJOR MISSION...

SIGH

...WITH THESE LINGERING DOUBTS PLAGUING ME.

STILL, YOU KNOW...

...WHY D'YOU THINK THEY WENT AND MADE THE BURIAL GROUNDS?

YOU CAN'T JUST BARGE INTO MY OFFICE.

GODO.

I KNEW IT. YOU'RE WIPED OUT, AREN'T YOU?

IRGH...

IT'S WEIRD YOU DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE ME.

...

WHAT? BUT I SAID I WAS COMING IN.

DIDN'T YOU HEAR ME?

IF YOU SAY SO.

HMMM

GLARE

I AM NOT.

I KNOW.

BUT PRINCE TAKAIHITO WARNED YOU, REMEMBER?

YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL.

ONE MISSTEP AND SOME MAY LOSE THEIR LIVES.

HOW COULD I FORGET?

IN FACT, IT'S AFFECTED ME DEEPLY.

BUT WHOEVER IT IS...

PRINCE TAKAIHITO DID NOT SAY WHO.

IT COULD BE MY MEN. IT COULD BE CIVILIANS.

OR PERHAPS IT COULD BE ME.

...I DON'T WANT THEM TO DIE.

IF IT'S WEIGHING ON YOU SO MUCH, JUST FORGET ABOUT IT.

NO GOOD SOLDIER WOULD.

AND EVEN IF IT WASN'T AN ORDER, YOU'D NEVER FORGET ABOUT IT ANYWAY.

IT'S A DIRECT ORDER. NOT LIKE YOU CAN IGNORE THAT.

SIGH

...IS WHAT I *WISH* I COULD TELL YOU. SHEESH.

I SEE. THANK YOU.

THE INFORMANT CAME TO DELIVER YOUR REPORT WHILE YOU WERE OCCUPIED.

OH, RIGHT.

HERE, CAPTAIN.

IT'S ABOUT THE USUBAS, ISN'T IT?

I CAN DO SOME INVESTIGATING FOR YOU, IF YOU WANT.

THINGS ARE ALREADY VERY BUSY. DON'T STICK YOUR NOSE WHERE IT DOESN'T BELONG.

THERE IS NO NEED FOR YOU TO TAKE PART IN THIS INVESTIGA-TION.

IT'S A PRIVATE MATTER.

HMPH

FINE.

SO LONG AS I KNOW WHERE THEY—

NO. STAND DOWN, GODO.

I'D DO A GREAT JOB LOOKING THEM UP.

SERIOUSLY. BE CAREFUL.

THAT GOES FOR YOU, TOO, CAPTAIN.

AND ABOUT BEING BUSY AND NOT STICKING YOUR NOSE IN—

HM

KSHUNK

11

MIYO'S MATERNAL FAMILY— THE USUBAS.

Investigative Findings

BUT THEY ARE UNIQUE EVEN AMONG OTHER GIFTED FAMILIES...

...FOR HIDING THEIR ENTIRE CLAN AWAY SO THOROUGHLY.

I CAN ONLY TURN TO THEM FOR HELP IN RESOLVING MIYO'S NIGHTMARES.

I HAVE AN INFORMANT LOOKING INTO THEM, BUT HE COMES UP EMPTY-HANDED EVERY TIME.

THE KUDO FAMILY HAS NO RECORD OF EVER COMING INTO CONTACT WITH THEM EITHER.

THERE IS NOT A SINGLE TRACE OF THEM IN PUBLIC RECORDS.

HE WAS THE ONE WHO WED HIS SON, SHINICHI, TO SUMI USUBA...

...SO HE MUST HAVE HAD CONTACT WITH THE USUBA CLAN.

I FIRST HAD MY INFORMANT LOOK INTO THE PREVIOUS LORD SAIMORI.

AS THAT HAPPENED TWO DECADES AGO, IT DID NOT RESULT IN ANY LEADS.

BUT THAT LORD AND HIS WIFE DIED IN AN ACCIDENT SOON AFTER THEIR SON'S WEDDING.

I'M NOW PLANNING TO INVESTIGATE THROUGH SUMI USUBA.

I'M FAIRLY SURE OF HOW OLD SHE WAS.

THANK YOU.

...AND LOOK FOR THE NAME "SUMI."

I PLAN TO SEARCH ROSTERS OF GIRLS' SCHOOLS IN THE CAPITAL...

...ONLY FOR THE YEARS SHE WOULD HAVE ATTENDED SCHOOL...

BUT IT IS VERY LIKELY THEY WILL HAVE SENT HER UNDER A DIFFERENT LAST NAME.

THEY MAY HAVE SENT THEIR DAUGHTER TO SCHOOL.

THE USUBAS ARE A GIFTED FAMILY.

...STUDENTS NAMED SUMI.

HE FOUND 20...

FLIP

...THAT SHE LIVED IN THE CITY OR WENT TO SCHOOL IN THE FIRST PLACE.

10

FLIP

THERE IS NO SOLID EVIDENCE...

I AM ARATA TSURUKI.

SUMI...

Sumi Tsuruki

...TSURUKI?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

TSURUKI.

I WOULD NOT CALL THAT A COMMON SURNAME.

TO SEE THE SAME NAME IN THE SAME DAY...

SUMI TSURUKI...

...FELL ILL SOON AFTER GRADUATION.

COULD THIS BE A COINCI-DENCE?

OR WAS THIS PLANNED?

I MUST LOOK INTO THE TSURUKIS MORE.

I HAVE A FEELING IT WILL BE WORTH IT.

GH...

NEE NEE NEE NEE

NEE

Chapter 23: True Family

zzz

SIGH

SHF

THIS IS PRACTICALLY A NIGHTLY ROUTINE NOW.

...IF IT MEANS MIYO GETS TO SLEEP PEACEFULLY.

BUT THIS IS A SMALL PRICE TO PAY...

HM.

MEEEN

MEEEN

MEEEN

HAVE A GOOD DAY.

I'M OFF.

LORD KUDO...

...SEEMS TIRED.

WORK MUST BE BUSY.

HE'S WORKING LATE MUCH MORE OFTEN.

IF ONLY THERE WERE SOMETHING I COULD DO TO HELP HIM...

HE SPEAKS MUCH LESS TOO.

AND I THINK HE SIGHS MORE NOW.

SWAY

MEEEEEN

IT'S GOING TO BE ANOTHER HOT DAY.

MEEEN

MEEEEEN

MEEEEEN

...I HAVE NIGHTMARES.

TAP

EVERY NIGHT NOW...

SLIDE

I DON'T SLEEP WELL BECAUSE OF IT.

I CAN'T SHAKE MY EXHAUSTION.

BUT...

GRIP

...AND PULLS ME TOWARD THE LIGHT.

...THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE IN MY DREAMS WHO TAKES MY HAND...

I'M STILL...

...OKAY.

I THINK THAT'S THE ONLY REASON WHY I'VE BEEN GETTING A LITTLE REST.

STEAM

THIS LOOKS AMAZING!

IT *IS* AMAZING!

MMM!

I'M GLAD YOU LIKE IT.

IT'S TRUE! YOU CAN REALLY SEE THE SKILL OF A COOK IN A SIMPLE DISH.

I'M NOT. THE SIMPLEST DISHES ARE THE MOST DIFFICULT.

OH! YOU'RE GOING TOO FAR, YURIE.

IT'S JUST A SIMPLE DISH.

LADY MIYO IS TRULY AN EXCELLENT COOK.

SIGH

...AM *AWFUL* AT COOKING.

I...

AND I CAN CUT MYSELF JUST BY HOLDING A KNIFE.

OH. YOU MADE THIS.

I BURN BROILED FOOD.

YOU'RE BLEED-ING!

?

GLOOP

MY STEWS ARE WATERY.

I THOUGHT IT WAS A FIRE, BUT IT'S JUST YOU.

IT'S ONE REGRET OF MINE.

I THOUGHT I WAS HOPELESS AT COOKING UP, SO I GAVE UP.

BUT PART OF ME WISHES I'D GIVEN IT MORE EARNEST PRACTICE.

...REGRET THAT?

YOU...

GASP

HAZUKI DID MENTION...

...THAT SHE WENT THROUGH A DIVORCE.

I SMILE

SHALL I TELL YOU?

ABOUT MY MARRIAGE.

I DON'T THINK I SHOULD URGE HER ON PURELY OUT OF CURIOSITY.

BUT I DO WANT TO KNOW.

TINK

IS JOINING ANOTHER'S FAMILY...

...REALLY THAT DIFFICULT?

SHE'S SUCH A LOVELY PERSON.

WHY DID SHE GET DIVORCED?

HEE-HEE

OF COURSE IT IS.

IS IT ALL RIGHT...

...FOR ME TO KNOW?

SINCE A YOUNG AGE, I'VE ALWAYS BEEN TOLD THAT I HAVE TOO MUCH ENERGY AND TALK TOO MUCH.

BUT I DID WELL IN SCHOOL AND IN ALL MY LESSONS.

ALTHOUGH THE ONE THING I NEVER MASTERED WAS COOKING.

I MARRIED WHEN I WAS 17.

IT WAS A POLITICAL MARRIAGE TO STRENGTHEN THE TIES...

...BETWEEN A GIFTED FAMILY AND THE MILITARY.

I WAS MARRYING INTO A PRESTIGIOUS FAMILY THAT SENT MANY INTO THE MILITARY.

THEY HAD A STAFF OF SERVANTS, SO I WASN'T TOO WORRIED.

HIS FAMILY WELCOMED ME WARMLY AS WELL.

...HE WAS FAITHFUL, KIND, AND A GOOD PERSON.

WHILE HE WAS NO BEAUTIFUL YOUNG BOY...

HE WAS MORE THAN A DECADE OLDER THAN ME.

SO I THOUGHT I WAS LUCKY.

I'D HEARD SO MANY HORROR STORIES OF GIRLS MARRYING TERRIBLE PEOPLE.

BESIDES, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE...

...I LOVED HIM.

WE DIDN'T EVEN FIGHT ONCE.

I DON'T THINK HE HATED ME.

I WAS SO HAPPY THEN.

TWO YEARS LATER, WE HAD A SON.

HE AND HIS WHOLE FAMILY WERE DELIGHTED.

BUT HIS FAMILY...

...STARTED TO KEEP A CLOSE EYE ON MY WAY OF THINKING...

...AND ON THE FACT THAT I COULDN'T DO HOUSEWORK.

SHOULDN'T YOU ACT A LITTLE MORE RESERVED?

WHY ARE YOU THIS POOR AT COOKING?

...GREW TO BE TOO MUCH.

SO THIS PRESSURE FROM MY HUSBAND'S PARENTS AND RELATIVES...

I WAS ALREADY DEALING WITH THE BURDEN OF CARING FOR A BABY.

I STARTED BURSTING INTO TEARS EVERY NIGHT FOR NO REASON.

BUT ONE DAY, MY HUSBAND SAID—

HAZUKI.

I WASN'T SURE WHAT I COULD DO ANYMORE.

MY HUSBAND COMFORTED ME, BUT NOTHING CHANGED.

WE'RE GETTING A DIVORCE.

AREN'T WE GOING TO TALK ABOUT THIS?!

SINCE WHEN?

HOW COULD YOU DECIDE THIS ALL ON YOUR OWN?!

I WAS SO ANGRY. WE HAD A HUGE FIGHT.

AND THEN THE NEXT THING I KNEW, THE DIVORCE HAD ACTUALLY GONE THROUGH. I WAS SHOCKED.

I HAD NO IDEA SHE WENT THROUGH ALL OF THAT.

TO BE SCOLDED EVERY DAY BY ONE'S FAMILY...

...IS TRULY PAINFUL.

WILL THE DAY COME WHERE I, TOO, CAN SPEAK...

...OF WHAT HAPPENED IN THE SAIMORI HOUSE WITH A SMILE LIKE THAT?

I WAS SHOCKED TOO.

ALL OF US ON STAFF THOUGHT OF HER AS OUR PRECIOUS DARLING DAUGHTER, YOU KNOW.

THANK YOU.

WE DID!

AWW, DID YOU REALLY?

HEE HEE

BUT...

...WHAT I REGRET HAPPENED AFTER THAT.

HE DECIDED ON A DIVORCE IN ORDER TO SAVE ME.

AND I REALIZED THE REASON HE ANNOUNCED IT WAS HAPPENING WITH SUCH FINALITY...

...WAS SO THAT I WOULDN'T HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT EVERYTHING.

I DID AS I WAS TOLD, AND I LOST BOTH MY HUSBAND AND MY SON.

I KNOW I COULD'VE PUT MORE EFFORT INTO COOKING.

IF ONLY I'D TRIED HARDER.

HM?

SO, MIYO?

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU GIVE YOUR ALL TO WHAT YOU CAN DO.

JUST LIKE YOU'RE DOING NOW.

IN MY CASE, I LOST SIGHT OF THAT.

BUT IT'S ALSO IMPORTANT TO HONOR YOUR OWN FEELINGS.

THAT'S WHY I WANT YOU TO THINK ABOUT SOMETHING, MIYO.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?

HOW DO YOU WANT TO LIVE?

I...

...WANT...

CLENCH

...ONE THING.

FOR CERTAIN.

I WANT...

...TO REMAIN AT LORD KUDO'S SIDE.

ALWAYS.

AND FOREVER.

...TO HAVE SOMEONE CARE FOR HIM LIKE YOU DO.

KIYOKA IS TRULY A LUCKY MAN...

NEE
NEE
NEE

IN LISTENING TO HAZUKI'S STORY, I REALIZED SOMETHING.

LORD KUDO...

...THAT FAMILY SHOULD HELP ONE ANOTHER AND THAT'S NORMAL.

I WANT TO BE SOMEONE YOU CAN RELY ON.

WE'RE GOING TO BE FAMILY SOON.

NOT ONCE HAD IT EVER CROSSED MY MIND...

I DON'T KNOW WHAT "FAMILY" IS.

IF I COULDN'T EVEN GET ALONG...

...WITH MY BLOOD FAMILY MEMBERS...

IF I WERE TO HAVE A CHILD...

HAZUKI WAS LUCKY TO HAVE BEEN WARMLY WELCOMED.

BUT IF I WERE TO MEET LORD KUDO'S PARENTS AND RELATIVES...

...BEING A PART OF ANOTHER'S FAMILY.

EVEN HAZUKI HAD A HARD TIME...

WILL I...

...BE ABLE TO BE PART OF LORD KUDO'S?

I WANT TO KNOW...

...WHAT HE THINKS OF FAMILY.

OF COURSE.

LORD KUDO?

MAY I SIT BESIDE YOU?

I BROUGHT TEA AND SOME PICKLED VEGETABLES.

TNK

THANKS.

I ONLY WANTED TO DO SOMETHING FOR HIM.

DID I GO TOO FAR?

BARLEY TEA?

PUFF

YES.

I THOUGHT IT WOULD SUIT SUMMER NICELY.

I DECIDED TO TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT THAN THE USUAL GREEN TEA.

CRUNCH

THERE HAS BEEN AN ABUNDANT CROP OF VEGETABLES THIS YEAR.

I THOUGHT THEY WOULD KEEP MUCH LONGER THIS WAY.

YURIE AND I MADE THE PICKLES TOGETHER.

THANK YOU.

THEY'RE VERY GOOD.

TLIIING

NEE NEE NEE NEE NEE NEE

NEE NEE NEE NEE NEE NEE

HAZUKI TOLD ME ABOUT HERSELF TODAY.

UM.

LORD KUDO?

YES.

AND...

...THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE I WANTED TO ASK YOU.

SHE DID?

WAS IT ABOUT HER DIVORCE?

WHO IS HAZUKI...

...TO YOU?

BROTHER AND SISTER, RELATED BY BLOOD...

MY HALF-SISTER AND I NEVER UNDERSTOOD EACH OTHER.

BUT WHAT WERE THINGS LIKE FOR LORD KUDO?

TOK

I SUPPOSE YOU AND I HAVE NEVER DISCUSSED THIS.

WHO IS SHE?

HMM.

...WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN POLAR OPPOSITES OF ONE ANOTHER.

WHILE I DON'T THINK HAZUKI AND I HAVE A BAD RELATIONSHIP BY ANY MEANS...

I OFTEN FOUND HER ANNOYING.

BUT...

YOU'VE SEEN HOW MUCH OF A FUSS SHE MAKES.

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, SHE WAS ALWAYS IN MY BUSINESS, TEASING ME.

WE WERE BORN AND RAISED IN THE SAME HOME...

...AND WE UNDERSTAND WHAT THE OTHER THINKS.

...FEELINGS OF LIKE OR DISLIKE HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH OUR BOND.

WE NEED NOT WORRY ABOUT HURTING OR OFFENDING EACH OTHER.

...I THINK OF HER AS A GOOD PERSON.

THOUGH OUR PERSONALITIES ARE VERY DIFFERENT...

LIKE OR DISLIKE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH IT...?

GASP

I HAVE A FEELING...

...THAT IS THE TRUE MEANING OF FAMILY.

CREEP

LORD KUDO...

...TRULY TRUSTS HAZUKI.

YES.

DOES THAT ANSWER YOUR QUESTION?

IF ONLY ONE DAY...

...I COULD BE HIS FAMILY TOO.

I'M JEALOUS OF THEM.

YOU, OF ALL PEOPLE?

GRIT

...MAY NOT BE SOMETHING SOMEONE LIKE ME SHOULD EVER DARE HOPE FOR.

I KNOW THAT MY DESIRE TO BE A TRUE PART OF LORD KUDO'S FAMILY...

AND ONCE I HAD, I BEGAN TO WANT HIS HEART AS WELL.

IN THIS HOUSE, I HAVE LEARNED THE WARMTH OF HAVING A HOME.

I THINK...

...I'M BECOMING GREEDY.

MIYO.

I'M SORRY MY WORK HAS BEEN SO BUSY LATELY.

IT'S ALL RIGHT.

...I WOULD ONLY BOTHER HIM IF I TOLD HIM THAT.

SQUEEZE

I MISS HIM WHEN I'M ALONE, BUT...

LORD KUDO HOLDS A POSITION OF GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.

I'LL BE FINE.

JUST CONCENTRATE ON YOUR WORK.

ARE YOU SURE?

HUH?

...

IS THERE ANYTHING TROUBLING YOU?

IF YOU WANT TO TALK, I'M HERE TO LISTEN.

SHF

HM?

ALL RIGHT.

MIYO.

COME CLOSER.

MY—

MY LORD?!

GRAB

IF YOU'RE LONELY, TELL ME.

IF IT'S TOO HARD FOR YOU, TELL ME.

IF YOU DON'T TELL ME...

...I'LL NEVER KNOW.

BUT IF I DO...

SHOULD I TELL HIM ABOUT MY NIGHTMARES?

I WOULD ONLY ADD ANOTHER BURDEN TO HIS EXHAUSTION FROM WORK.

...

ALL I HAVE TO DO...

...IS BEAR THROUGH THIS FOR JUST A LITTLE LONGER...

...UNTIL HIS WORK IS NO LONGER SO BUSY.

I'M FINE.

HOW COULD I BE... LONELY?

BECAUSE I AM.

YOU'RE NOT?

GRIP

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT.

L-LORD KUDO IS LONELY?

BLUSHHH

WITHOUT ME?!

...NOT?

ARE YOU REALLY...

...

I...

...LONELY TOO.

I'VE BEEN...

SHF
M

BADUMP

I'M SORRY.

YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME THAT TO BEGIN WITH.

AND YOU'RE STILL AN INCURABLE APOLOGIZER.

HEH

HUH?

BUT HAVEN'T YOU NOTICED?

YOUR APOLOGIES USED TO BE SO STIFF.

NOW ALL I EVER HEAR IS A MERE "I'M SORRY."

OH—

I HADN'T NOTICED AT ALL.

WHEN DID THAT HAPPEN?

OH!

OH MY.

I DIDN'T SPEAK LIKE THIS FOR SO LONG...

...THAT IT FEELS A BIT STRANGE NOW.

IT DOESN'T MAKE ME SOUND LIKE A CHILD?

I, UM...

IT'S OKAY.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO BACK.

IN FACT, YOU COULD STAND TO RELAX EVEN MORE.

WITHIN THESE WALLS, YOU DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT A THING.

SPEAKING INFORMALLY MEANS YOU'RE MORE COMFORTABLE HERE NOW.

...JUST HOW...

...LONELY I'VE ALWAYS BEEN.

NOW THAT HE'S SAID IT, IT'S MADE ME REALIZE...

BUT NOW, THERE'S A WARMTH DEEP IN MY HEART.

GRAB

MIYO.

BE MORE HONEST.

BE SELFISH.

YOU'RE ALLOWED TO BE CLOSE TO ME.

AND WHATEVER IT IS...

...I WILL EMBRACE IT ALL.

...HE'S TREATING ME AS FAMILY?

DOES THIS MEAN...

YET HE FINDS TIME TO CARE FOR ME.

HE'S SO KIND.

HE'S SO BUSY.

SQUEEZE

...THEN IT PAINS ME TO CAUSE HIM TROUBLE...

IF IT'S NORMAL FOR FAMILY TO HELP ONE ANOTHER...

...WHEN HE'S ALREADY TIRED FROM WORK.

I THINK...

...I'M STILL ALL RIGHT.

MY NIGHTMARES NOW LAST TILL MORNING.

SWSH

SWSH

THE PERSON WHO APPEARED IN MY DREAMS TO PULL ME FROM THEM NO LONGER APPEARS.

NOW HE ONLY COMES HOME FOR A SHORT TIME IN THE EVENING.

LORD KUDO'S WORK GROWS BUSIER BY THE DAY.

PHEW

I AM SO SCARED OF HAVING THEM THAT I'M UNABLE TO FALL ASLEEP...

...AND DO NOT SLEEP THROUGH THE NIGHT ANYMORE.

MEEN

MEEN

I CAN'T ADD TO HIS BURDENS.

I MUST KEEP IT TOGETHER.

MEEN

Chapter 24: The Visitor

MEEEEN

MEEEEN

MEEEEN

SMILE

HELLO.

MY NAME IS MIYO SAIMORI.

O-OH, OKAY.

ALTHOUGH I CAN TELL YOU'RE ON THE SHY SIDE.

I THINK YOU'RE READY TO USE THIS WITH STRANGERS NOW.

YOU'RE GIVING OFF SUCH AN ELEGANT AIR.

THAT SMILE LOOKS SO NATURAL ON YOU NOW, MIYO!

HELLO?

SIGH

LET'S TAKE A QUICK BREAK.

I'LL PRACTICE MY SMILE WITH OUR GUEST!

THIS IS THE PERFECT CHANCE.

YES!

I'LL GO.

OH NO, I'LL—

SHF

OH?

DO WE HAVE A VISITOR?

OH!

RATTLE

I'M SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING.

HE'S THE ONE THAT SAVED ME WHEN I ALMOST FAINTED...

...WHEN I WAS OUT AND ABOUT WITH HAZUKI AND YURIE THE OTHER DAY.

YOU'RE...

YOU'RE—

HMM?

PARDON ME.

THIS *IS* THE HOME OF MR. KIYOKA KUDO, IS IT NOT?

Y-YES.

IT IS...

COULD HE BE A FRIEND OF LORD KUDO'S?

IS THE MAJOR AT HOME TODAY?

NO.

HE'S AT WORK TODAY.

HE IS?

I HEARD HE WAS OFF AND AT HOME...

ERR...

OH.

I'M SORRY FOR MY OVERSIGHT.

IS THAT SO?

HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE OFF TODAY, BUT HE WAS SUDDENLY CALLED IN.

...DID YOU COME HERE ON FOOT?

IF I MAY...

I DID.

WOMP WOMP

SIGH

THEN HE'S AT THE BASE.

MEEN

MEEN

WHY DON'T YOU COME INSIDE AND REST?

YOU MUST BE EXHAUSTED FROM THIS HEAT.

GLUG

GLUG

GLUG

AHHHHHH

I REALLY APPRECIATE IT.

THANK YOU SO MUCH.

THANK YOU FOR SAVING ME THE OTHER DAY.

TNK

I SHOULD SAY THE SAME.

SHF

OH

IT'S A PLEASURE.

MY NAME IS ARATA TSURUKI.

A HANDSHAKE ?

THIS IS MY FIRST HANDSHAKE.

DUE TO WESTERN INFLUENCES, YOU MIGHT BE ASKED FOR A HANDSHAKE SOMETIME.

I AM...

...MIYO SAIMORI.

...AND GENTLE.

THIS HAND IS WARM...

HM?

MUTTER

...SO THIN.

SO YOU'RE MAJOR KUDO'S FIANCÉE, MISS MIYO.

THERE HAVE BEEN RUMORS OF YOU OUT IN SOCIETY, YOU KNOW.

OH, IT WAS NOTHING.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP THE OTHER DAY.

WHAT KIND OF RUMORS, I WONDER.

IT MAKES ME FEEL EMBARRASSED THAT OTHERS HAVE BEEN TALKING ABOUT ME AND I DIDN'T KNOW.

IS THAT SO?

BUT...

...I AM DISAP-POINTED...

...IN MAJOR KUDO.

HH_WHP

TENSE

YES, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?

ISN'T THAT A BIT RUDE TO SAY?

WH—

WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?

MISS MIYO.

YOU LOOK DEATHLY PALE.

ARE YOU AWARE OF THIS?

YOU DON'T LOOK WELL.

IT'S MUCH WORSE THAN WHEN WE FIRST MET IN TOWN.

IT ONLY HAS TO DO WITH ME...

THIS IS NOT...

...LORD KUDO'S FAULT.

GRIP

MIYO...

I LOOK PALE BECAUSE OF...

BUT I DOUBT I'VE MADE AN INCORRECT OBSERVATION.

I'VE CROSSED A LINE, HAVEN'T I?

TO HAVE ALL OF THESE PEOPLE...

...PUSHING YOU UNTIL YOU'VE REACHED THIS POINT...

...LORD KUDO...

I HARDLY FIND IT ACCEPTABLE.

...AND HAZUKI?

...

I SEE NO NEED TO FORCE YOU INTO A ROLE FOR WHICH YOU ARE NOT MEANT.

I KNOW YOU MUST HAVE YOUR OWN TALENTS.

WHAT RUBBISH.

THAT'S...

...NOT TRUE!

PLEASE, STOP!

THEY'RE JUST GOING ALONG WITH MY SELFISH REQUEST.

THAT I'M UNWELL IS ENTIRELY MY FAULT.

LORD KUDO AND HAZUKI ARE ONLY HELPING ME.

I AM DOING THIS BECAUSE I WANT TO.

I CAN'T STAND THE THOUGHT THAT THE OTHERS ARE BEING BLAMED...

...EVEN THOUGH I DID THIS TO MYSELF.

SIIIGH

YET I'VE RUINED THE MOOD.

MY APOLOGIES.

FORGIVE ME.

YOU WERE KIND ENOUGH TO ALLOW ME TO REST.

SHF

I'LL BE GOING NOW.

IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME.

HE REALLY RAN HIS MOUTH, DIDN'T HE?!

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT MAN?!

SHF

MIYO?

BUT I MUST.

WHAT?! FORGET HIM!

YOU DON'T HAVE TO!

I'LL SEE HIM OFF.

MISS MIYO?

NO. I WAS THE RUDE ONE.

PLEASE, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT.

I AM DEEPLY SORRY.

I LOST MY TEMPER.

BUT...MISS MIYO.

I CAN GIVE YOU...

...A ROLE ONLY YOU CAN FULFILL.

IF THAT INTERESTS YOU, FEEL FREE TO CONTACT ME.

RUSTLE

A ROLE...

...ONLY I CAN FULFILL?

RATTLE

...MAJOR KUDO.

I APOLOGIZE FOR MY TARDINESS...

MEEEN

MEEEN

YOU'RE LATE.

GLARE

WHY?

IF YOU DON'T MIND ME ASKING.

I AM TRULY SORRY.

I MADE A BIT OF A MISTAKE.

I SEE.

SOMEONE FAILED TO INFORM YOU OF THE CHANGE.

I'D HEARD YOU WERE OFF DUTY TODAY, MAJOR.

SO I DROPPED BY YOUR HOUSE.

IF IT'S TRUE HE VISITED MY HOUSE, THEN WHAT IS HE UP TO?

THIS FEELS DISINGENUOUS, BUT I HAVE NO BASIS FOR THAT FEELING.

HE MAY VERY WELL NOT BE LYING AT ALL.

BUT I HEAR THAT THE ARMY OFFICERS AND THE MINISTRY OF THE IMPERIAL HOUSEHOLD ARE STILL IN A STATE OF CONFUSION DUE TO THE BURIAL GROUNDS INCIDENT.

...HAVE HAD MORE AND MORE WORK THESE PAST FEW DAYS.

I, TOO...

I RETURN HOME IN THE EVENING, ONLY TO COME BACK TO WORK AT NIGHT.

IT HAS BEEN LIKE THIS EVERY DAY THUS FAR.

WE THEN PICK OUT THE MOST USEFUL INFORMATION, COLLECT EVIDENCE...

...AND I SEND THOROUGH REPORTS TO MY SUPERIORS. IT'S TOUGH WORK.

REPORTED SIGHTINGS OF GHOSTS AND COMPLAINTS THEREOF ARE DIRECTED TO THIS UNIT.

I NAP DURING ANY SPARE MOMENTS.

BUT THAT JUST PUTS MORE WORK ON YOU.

I'M GRATEFUL THAT YOU SEND US JUNIORS HOME TO REST.

YOU HAVE GOT TO REST, CAPTAIN.

YOU'VE BEEN ALL WORKED UP RECENTLY, CAPTAIN.

YOUR FACE LOOKS LIKE THIS NOW.

NO! YOU SHOULD SLEEP AT *HOME!*

NOT AT BASE!

BUT...

I COULDN'T POSSIBLY WHEN I'M MERELY A LITTLE BUSY.

SIGH

...FOR EVERY NIGHT I DO NOT RETURN HOME...

...I CANNOT BE THERE TO SOOTHE MIYO'S NIGHTMARES. I WORRY.

twitch

AH, YES.

I MET MISS MIYO TODAY.

SHE RECEIVED ME VERY GRACIOUSLY.

I WAS IMPRESSED. YOU HAVE YOURSELF A WONDERFUL FIANCÉE.

SNEER

DO YOU MEAN THAT?

YES? IT'S THE TRUTH.

BUT...

...I AM NOT IMPRESSED BY HOW YOU TREAT SOMEONE SO LOVELY.

...IF YOU PARDON MY MEDDLING, I MUST SAY...

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

BUT SHE WAS EVEN WORSE TODAY.

SHE SEEMED FAIRLY ILL AT THE TIME.

SHE WAS DEATHLY PALE, AND I CAUGHT HER AS SHE FAINTED.

I MET HER IN TOWN NOT LONG AGO.

I FIND IT TERRIBLY UNPLEASANT TO HAVE A MAN WHO IS NO MORE THAN A STRANGER TO MIYO...

...SPEAK OF HER LIKE THIS.

THAT FILLS ME WITH INDESCRIBABLE DISCOMFORT.

THIS IS MY FIRST TIME HEARING THAT THEY'VE MET BEFORE.

THE NIGHTMARES THAT PLAGUE HER HAVE WEAKENED HER TERRIBLY.

SHE LOOKS SO UNWELL THAT SHE COULD BLOW AWAY AT ANY INSTANT.

OF COURSE I'VE NOTICED.

MIYO HAS BEEN LOOKING POORLY.

I MYSELF HAVE BEEN SO BUSY WITH WORK I HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO GO HOME.

BUT I CANNOT USE THAT AS AN EXCUSE.

I BELIEVE THE USUBA GIFT IS CAUSING THIS.

BUT THE SEARCH IS GOING NOWHERE.

AND YET, I...

GRIT

...CANNOT EVEN RECALL...

...WHAT MIYO LOOKED LIKE THE DAY BEFORE...

...I WOULDN'T TREAT HER LIKE THAT.

IF IT WERE ME...

REGARD-LESS OF YOUR WORK...

...SHOULDN'T YOU BE MORE CONSIDERATE OF YOUR FIANCÉE?

YOU SHOULD AT LEAST TALK TO HER.

GRIP

MIYO...

TRREEE

TRRRR

SKRITCH

SKRITCH

TRREEEE

TKTKTK

Chapter 25: Feelings Unaligned

...SHOULDN'T YOU BE MORE CONSIDERATE OF YOUR FIANCÉE?

REGARDLESS OF YOUR WORK...

DROOP

...

I CANNOT LOSE FOCUS WHEN WE'RE SO BUSY.

BUT...

...THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME...

...IF I CANNOT REMEMBER HOW MIYO LOOKED YESTERDAY.

I'M... UNEASY.

PLOP

GASP

CAPTAIN.

GODO.

I DID.
I TRIED CALLING FOR YOUR ATTENTION TOO.

I TOLD YOU TO KNOCK.

RIGHT.

THANKS.

HERE'S THE REPORT FROM THE INFORMANT.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE?

NO.

NOTHING AT ALL.

IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME!

KCHAK

WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIM?

Investigative Summary

ONE SUMI TSURUKI CAME UP IN THE LAST REPORT.

SO I HAD THE INFORMANT LOOK INTO THE TSURUKI FAMILY.

THE TSURUKI FAMILY TOOK MONEY FROM THE SAIMORI FAMILY?!

In the year
the Tsuruki fam
receives a monetar
from the Saimori fa

THIS MUST MEAN IT WAS THE SAIMORI FAMILY THAT GAVE THEM A LOAN TO REBUILD.

IT WAS 20 YEARS AGO THAT TSURUKI TRADING ALMOST FAILED.

THAT WAS ALSO AROUND THE TIME THAT SUMI USUBA MARRIED INTO THE SAIMORI FAMILY...

IS TSURUKI A FALSE NAME FOR THE USUBAS, THEN?

TSURUKI...
SAIMORI...

AND USUBA...

NO.

SNAP

IF IT WERE ME, I WOULDN'T TREAT HER LIKE THAT.

WHOA!

SLAM

IS ARATA TSURUKI AFTER MIYO?!

"STILL"? YOU WATCHED ME LEAVE.

YOU'RE STILL HERE?

WHY DID YOU JUMP UP LIKE THAT?

GAVE ME A HEART ATTACK.

WHAT DO YOU WANT, THEN?

FINE.

I'VE BEEN KNOCKING AND CALLING FOR YOU.

GO HOME. RIGHT NOW.

CAPTAIN.

KLAK

WHAT?

AND IF YOU COME IN, WE'RE SENDING YOU HOME!

GODO.

WHAT ON EARTH—

KLUNK

AND TAKE TOMOR-ROW OFF!

YOU'RE SO TIRED.

HOW ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO DO YOUR JOB WHEN IT COUNTS?

YOU CAN'T FOCUS.

WE'LL TAKE CARE OF IT.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT YOUR WORK.

SO GET SOME REST. IF AT LEAST FOR A DAY.

I'LL SEND A FAMILIAR YOUR WAY IF SOMETHING COMES UP.

ALL RIGHT.

IT'S IN YOUR HANDS, THEN.

WE'VE GOT THIS, CAPTAIN!

TIK TIK TIK

RRRRR

SIGH

!

I'M HOME.

NEE NEE NEE NEE

MIYO ISN'T HERE TO GREET ME.

COULD SHE BE—

THUNK

EVEN THOUGH SHE USUALLY DOES.

TWAK

MIYO?

WAS THAT THE KITCHEN?!

MIYO
...

PHEW

STAGGER

TAK

EXHALE

HER NIGHTMARES MUST BE KEEPING HER UP.

HER COMPLEXION IS A LOT WORSE THAN IT USED TO BE.

NOT ONLY HAD I NEGLECTED HER...

...I HADN'T EVEN NOTICED.

I DESERVE EVERY OUNCE OF BLAME FOR THIS.

WHEN MIYO FIRST CAME TO THE HOUSE...

...SHE WAS IN TERRIBLE SHAPE.

SHE WAS UNHEALTHILY SKINNY.

HER SKIN AND HAIR WERE DULL.

AND SHE WAS EVEN PALER THAN THIS.

THAT SHOULD HAVE GOTTEN BETTER...

...AFTER LIVING A NORMAL LIFE.

WHY?

BUT THINGS ARE GOING BACK TO THE WAY THEY USED TO BE.

MIYO.

IT'S FINE.

W-WELCOME BACK!

I'M SORRY, I DIDN'T COME TO GREET YOU!

I'M HOME.

レ—

LORD KUDO?

I'M ALL RIGHT.

I-IT'S FINE.

MIYO.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO PUSH YOURSELF IF YOU'RE THAT TIRED.

GRAB

THEN WHY HAVE YOU BECOME ALL SKIN AND BONES?!

NOT AT ALL.

HAZUKI IS ALWAYS VERY CONSID-ERATE OF ME.

ARE YOUR STUDIES WITH HAZUKI TAKING THAT MUCH OF A TOLL ON YOU?

I—

THEN WHY ARE YOU THIS EXHAUSTED?

INATTENTIVE TO THE POINT YOU DO NOT NOTICE WHEN I ARRIVE HOME?!

I...

...DON'T...

IT REALLY ISN'T ANYTHING FOR YOU TO WORRY OVER.

BUT LORD KUDO, IT—

YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW...

...THAT NIGHTMARES PLAGUE YOU EVERY NIGHT?!

I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU.

YOU CAN TALK TO ME ABOUT ANYTHING.

YOU CAN RELY ON ME FOR ANYTHING.

BUT NO MATTER HOW MUCH TIME PASSES, YOU REMAIN FIRMLY CLOSED OFF.

NO.

YOU DID NOT EVEN TELL ME YOU MET ARATA TSURUKI.

I NEVER INTENDED TO CRITICIZE HER.

IS THAT WHY YOU NEVER BRING THINGS UP WITH ME YOURSELF?

DO YOU NOT TRUST ME?

NO, THAT'S NOT TRUE!

I CAN'T HAVE YOU WORRYING ABOUT ME ON TOP OF ALL THAT.

GRIP

YOU'RE SO BUSY...

...AND TIRED FROM WORK.

...WANT TO BOTHER YOU.

I DON'T...

I AM NOT *TIRED.*

YOU DO NOT GET TO DECIDE WHAT I AM!

GASP

I NEVER WANT TO HURT HER.

AND YET...

I WISH I COULD SHOW MIYO ALL THE CARE IN THE WORLD.

IF I KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN...

...I WOULD HAVE NEVER ALLOWED YOU THE CHANCE TO STUDY.

PLIP

WHAT...

...HAVE I DONE?

...ALL OF HER HARD WORK...

I HAVE JUST REJECTED...

...AND ALL OF HER.

STAGGER

...VERY SORRY...

I...

I AM SO...

MY...

...APOLOGIES.

SHE'S SO LIGHT. TOO LIGHT.

I HAD NO IDEA SHE HAD WEAKENED SO...

SHUDDER

THUD

I HURT MIYO.

AND NOW SHE IS BACK WHERE SHE STARTED.

YET I DID THE ONE THING I WAS NOT SUPPOSED TO DO.

SHE WAS ALREADY WEAKENED...

...AND HURT MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE.

THIS MAKES ME NO BETTER THAN A SAIMORI.

I'M SORRY.

EVEN THOUGH I KNOW NO APOLOGY WILL HELP.

I'M SORRY...

...MIYO.

!

I SUPPOSE HE GAVE THIS TO MIYO WHEN HE VISITED TODAY.

FLIP

Arata Tsuruki

...FROM ARATA TSURUKI.

THIS IS...

I KNEW IT.

HE'S INVOLVED WITH THE USUBAS.

"USUBA"?

Usuba

...

THIS MUST MEAN...

...HE'S WAITING FOR US.

MY NIGHTMARE...

...BECAME REALITY.

IF I KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN...

...I WOULD HAVE NEVER ALLOWED YOU THE CHANCE TO STUDY.

Chapter 26:
Tear-Streaked Morning

...TO BRING IT UP WITH HIM FIRST.

HE WAS WAITING FOR ME...

HE'D EVEN GONE OUT OF HIS WAY TO EMPHASIZE THAT...

IF YOU'RE LONELY, TELL ME.

IF IT'S TOO HARD FOR YOU, TELL ME.

I DID NOT GO TO HIM FOR HELP.

I AM NOT TIRED.

BUT HE WAS RIGHT.

YOU DO NOT GET TO DECIDE WHAT I AM!

I'D SIMPLY ASSUMED HE WAS TOO TIRED TO DEAL WITH ME.

...THAT NIGHT-MARES PLAGUE YOU EVERY NIGHT?!

YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW...

LORD KUDO KNEW I WASN'T GETTING ANY SLEEP.

THAT MEANS...

...I DIDN'T TRUST HIM.

GASP

YOU TRULY HAVE NO RIGHT TO BE HIS WIFE.

I KNEW IT.

...MORNING ALREADY?

IT'S...

HUFF

HUFF

CHIRP

CHIRP

...THE ONE WHO PULLS ME TO THE LIGHT WAS IN MY DREAM AGAIN.

I FEEL LIKE...

IF THIS IS SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ABOUT MY NIGHTMARES...

...THEN COULD IT BE...

GASP

...LORD KUDO?

I HAVE TO APOLOGIZE TO HIM.

WHP

HAVE I BEEN ASLEEP SINCE I FAINTED YESTERDAY?

HE WON'T LOOK AT ME.

...

I FEEL LIKE THINGS HAVE GONE BACK TO THE WAY THEY BEGAN.

AN APOLOGY ALONE WON'T BE ENOUGH TO FIX THIS.

UNLIKE IN MY DREAMS, YESTERDAY HE LOOKED...

...ON THE VERGE OF TEARS...

...AND SO VERY SAD.

THAT MEANS HE IS DISAPPOINTED IN ME.

AND THAT'S SO MUCH MORE PAINFUL THAN BEING YELLED AT.

YET I ONLY CAUSED HIM MORE PAIN.

I WANT TO SUPPORT HIM.

I WANT TO STAY BY HIS SIDE.

I DON'T THINK...

...ANYTHING WILL BE ENOUGH.

HM?

WHEN YOU'RE FINISHED EATING, GET READY TO GO OUT.

...ALL RIGHT.

MEEEN

MEEEN

HE TREATS ME AS KINDLY AS EVER.

BUT HE WON'T LOOK AT ME.

SKRRR

WE'RE AT...

Tsuruki Trading

...TRADING?

Tsuruki Trading

...TSURUKI...

O—

OKAY.

WE'RE GOING IN.

NO.

BUT HE IS EXPECTING ME.

I AM KUDO, OF THE SPECIAL ANTI-GRO-TESQUERIE UNIT.

I AM HERE TO SEE ARATA TSURUKI.

I'M SORRY, BUT DO YOU HAVE AN—

...HE'S BROUGHT ME ALONG FOR SOME REASON.

WELCOME, MAJOR KUDO.

LORD KUDO IS ANGRY.

HE HAS COME TO SEE MR. TSURUKI, BUT...!

PLEASE WAIT A MOMENT.

ALLOW ME TO CHECK WITH HIM.

O-OH, YES.

IT WAS NICE SEEING YOU YESTERDAY, MISS MIYO.

LET'S MOVE SOMEPLACE MORE COMFORTABLE, SHALL WE?

I KNOW WE HAVE PLENTY TO DISCUSS.

MEEN

MEEN

MEEN

I THOUGHT HE AND LORD KUDO WERE WORKING TOGETHER.

SO I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY I'M HERE.

THIS IS MR. TSURUKI'S HOUSE.

HAVE I...

...DONE SOMETHING WRONG?

MR. TSURUKI SAID THERE'S A LOT TO DISCUSS.

I HOPE YOU'VE NOT WAITED LONG.

AHH.

SHE LOOKS SO MUCH LIKE SUMI.

WHAT?

YOU MEAN...MY MOTHER?

SUMI?

THEN ALLOW ME...

...TO EXTEND YET ANOTHER WELCOME.

SIGH

IT SEEMS YOU'VE TOLD HER NOTHING.

TO THE USUBA HOUSEHOLD.

I AM THE PREVIOUS LORD USUBA—

YOSHIRO USUBA.

I AM YOUR GRANDFATHER.

MIYO.

I AM...

...YOUR COUSIN, MISS MIYO.

MY REAL NAME IS ARATA USUBA.

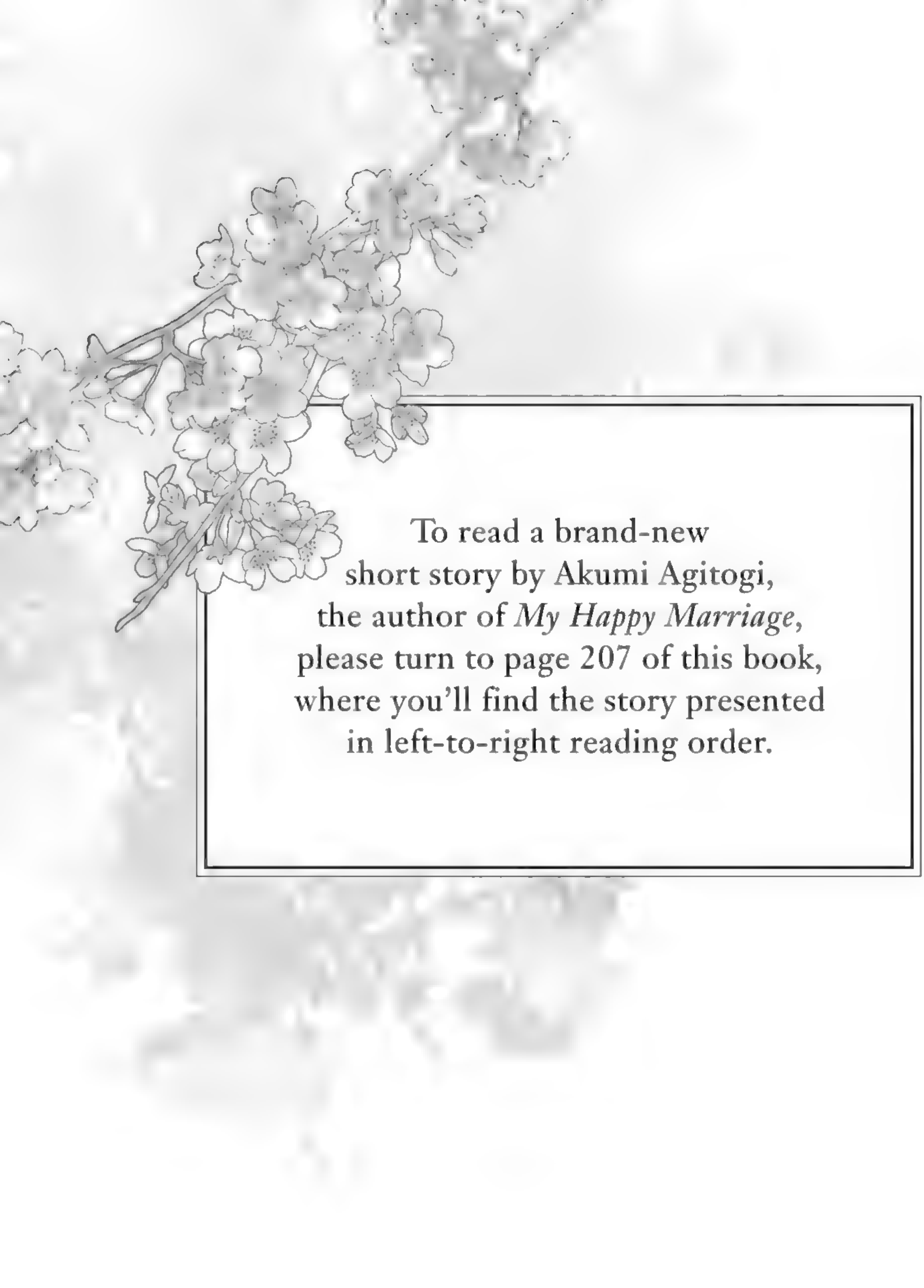
"TSURUKI" IS THE NAME WE USE WITH THE PUBLIC.

...MY MOTHER'S HOME?

THEN THIS MEANS...

...THIS WAS...

My Happy Marriage, Vol. 4 ○ END



To read a brand-new
short story by Akumi Agitogi,
the author of *My Happy Marriage*,
please turn to page 207 of this book,
where you'll find the story presented
in left-to-right reading order.

"...I, too, always feel grateful for the miracle that brought us together."

"Do you?"

"Yes. Because, at that time, he was the only one who let me stay with him."

Everything in Miyo seemed to say that it truly was a miracle that she met him. Something about that made her seem so lonely that Hazuki's heart gave a painful twinge.

Maybe they work so well together because they've both known what it is to be lonely.

Of all the calm young noblewomen Hazuki knew, she doubted any of them had ever experienced true loneliness.

She was genuinely glad that Miyo and Kiyoka had met. Once again, she felt a true sense of relief.

"I want Lord Kudo to be who he...very much so."

Part of what Miyo said was inaudible, the murmured words faded into the humidity of summer.

I'm so happy for you, Kiyoka.

Hazuki felt tension drain from her shoulders. She decided not to pity her little brother anymore.

Everyone lived their lives from a position atop the accumulation of all that had come before in life.

Even though Kiyoka and Miyo had both suffered in the past, it was because of those experiences leading them to this moment that they had met.

They had found the person who had everything they were looking for.

"My, aren't you two lucky," she murmured, and she and Miyo shared a small smile.

Not true, was what she couldn't say. Miyo was so honest; it was endearing how she struggled to finish that sentence.

"You know," Hazuki began, pausing to take a sip of her lukewarm tea and wet her lips. "If we're talking about who Kiyoka is, I'd say that it's a lot like him that he chose you to marry, Miyo. Does it upset you to hear that?"

"No."

"Good. I was never that surprised to hear about his failed engagements. I thought none would ever succeed."

Just as with his house, Kiyoka must have subconsciously decided on what he wanted in a wife, while being unaware of it himself.

But no woman coinciding with that ideal perfectly was ever matched with the head of the Kudo family. A pity.

Hazuki had plenty of noblewomen acquaintances who were calm, elegant, and were of docile disposition.

But none of them had quite the same air about them as this house.

I bet my brother is actually Princess Kaguya, turning away suitors left and right.

None of them were ever good enough for him.

Looking at it rationally, he was still very selfish for his age. And yet…

"I think meeting you was a miracle for my incompetent little brother, Miyo."

It was hard to consider Kiyoka meeting his perfect match anything other than a miracle. This sort of luck was irreplaceable—he was more blessed than anyone else in this world.

Hazuki grinned, and Miyo's expression softened. The faintest of smiles crossed her face.

She had simply been curious to know what sort of home her little brother had chosen.

I had a hard time picturing what that might be until I saw it for myself.

And when she did, it all made sense.

What Kiyoka wanted, *needed*, was this house.

It was much too small and simple for the home of Lord Kudo, head of a renowned family. But after a lifetime of feeling constrained by the Kudo family and growing tired of all it entailed, the house was like the representation of his secret longings.

At once she understood that of course this was something he would want—but at the same time, the house made her feel sorry for him.

Ever since he was little, he had suffered too much attention coming from his mother and all other women associated with the Kudo household, to say nothing of their meddling. And that, she felt, had shaped his desires and formed his obstinate personality.

Meeting Miyo had given her the same impression.

Miyo Saimori was a type of woman that Hazuki had never seen around Kiyoka before. She was quiet and reserved, yet upon closer inspection, that did not mean she entirely lacked a sense of self.

She was the same as this house. Though she was without pomp or showiness and did not exactly stand out, she was there.

"Oh, so loyal, Miyo. But it's okay. You can say he's a stick in the mud who has no way with words."

"Th-that's not…"

Her brother was not so much awkward as he was bad with words. It made her worry for his future, but at the same time, she knew that was simply who he was.

With a quiet huff of a laugh, her cheeks lifted in a smile, and she gave him a wave. "Of course. You don't need to worry about that."

"I would hope not."

That was the end of their conversation. Kiyoka then turned on his heel and walked out the door without another moment of hesitation, leaving Hazuki alone in the manor.

Though she had several servants with her, that was the first time she learned that there was a special sort of emptiness in watching the last of one's scattered family leave for good.

"And that was it," Hazuki concluded. "So? Don't you think he could stand to be a little more communicative?"

Miyo only blinked in response. It was likely unintentional on her part, but each measured reaction was what made the girl so charming. Hazuki gazed at her brother's fiancée fondly.

"I…think that sounds a lot like him," Miyo replied.

Kiyoka moved out of the grand estate and into a small house on the outskirts of the city.

The songs of the cicadas sounded louder than usual, perhaps because the trees were so close; an occasional breeze gently played with the wind chime on the veranda.

The garden Hazuki could see from the sitting room was compact, much like the one at her home, yet it was clearly very well taken care of.

The first time Hazuki came to this house was before Kiyoka moved in, right after she learned he'd purchased it.

Brother and sister formed a firm bond to survive their tumultuous home life, but it was when Kiyoka was still in junior high school that Hazuki got married and left.

Uncomfortable. Stifled. Never in control.

Just as Hazuki had felt that way growing up, Kiyoka—who had had to remain at home as the heir to the family—must have quickly grown fed up with all of it.

When Hazuki ended up divorcing and returning home as well, that was only another thing on his plate.

Of course he would eventually come to the end of his rope and want to leave.

"Did you want to say something?" he asked.

"I think you'll be fine since Yurie's going with you, but make sure you take proper care of yourself. You might be leaving the house, but you're still the new head of the Kudo family."

The moment the words left Hazuki's mouth, she realized it sounded like she was scolding him.

That was not what she meant to say to him. But the faint tinge of loneliness in her heart had slipped past her lips.

She would be living all alone in the big, sprawling Western-style manor.

Their parents had moved to their countryside villa, and Kiyoka, too, was about to step out the door. When she looked over her shoulder, all she could see was a cold, hollow mansion.

"I know."

Kiyoka turned away from her in his irritation and rested his hand on the doorknob. But he then turned to look back at Hazuki one last time.

"And you make sure to take care of the house too."

She knew immediately that this was his own way of encouraging her.

"You do, do you? Is this about your marriage? I suppose it *is* about time I go say hello to your fiancée."

Going off the odd tone in her brother's voice, she hazarded a guess as to what this was about.

"*Perhaps, but that isn't why I called.*"

Even over the phone, Kiyoka's voice brought forth a mental image of his sullen face, and she chuckled quietly.

"*I want you to give my fiancée…Miyo…an education.*"

The request was the last thing she was expecting, and a memory from several years prior flashed through her mind.

Kiyoka was never very fond of his birth home or his parents. It would not be an exaggeration to say he hated both.

The day he joined the army and left the manor was clear in Hazuki's memory.

"I can't believe you're actually going," Hazuki said to him as he was about to walk out the door.

Most of his belongings had already been moved to his new abode. Dressed casually, he carried a bag in one hand.

"I am," he replied.

"Yes… All right. Listen—"

She opened her mouth to speak, but ultimately faltered.

Did he really hate it here? I guess it'd only annoy him if I asked, though.

She didn't need to ask to know that he did.

Though their father, Tadakiyo, was in poor health, he was always sent on missions as the family head and because he was Gifted. Their mother, in an attempt to hide how lonely she was without him around, spent extravagant amounts of money and often threw the calm and quiet atmosphere of the house into chaos.

To Ease the Pain of Loneliness

by Akumi Agitogi

IT was an early summer afternoon when the telephone installed at the main Kudo residence rang.

When a servant called for her, Hazuki paused in her sorting of the cards and letters addressed to the Kudo family upon the occasion of summer and hot weather.

She came to the telephone, took the receiver, and was very surprised indeed by the voice she heard on the other end.

"Oh! Kiyoka? This is unusual. Is something the matter?"

"I know this is sudden, Hazuki."

Kiyoka Kudo was Hazuki's younger brother, and as children they had lived together on this estate. Now he was calling her, likely from his workplace, the Anti-Grotesquerie Unit base.

Even as Hazuki noted this was unusual out loud, inwardly she was shaking her head.

"Unusual" doesn't begin to cover it.

This was, without a doubt, a first.

They would often get in touch and see one another at holiday or other seasonal gatherings, but this time, no such occasion came to mind.

That meant he had called her regarding personal matters, which had never happened before. She would have considered hell itself more likely to freeze over than for something like this to ever take place.

What brought about this change of heart?

"I have a favor to ask of you."

MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

...BUT CAN SHE CATCH HOLD OF A HAPPY FUTURE FOR THE BOTH OF THEM?

MIYO DESPERATELY REACHES OUT...

LORD KUDO!

Continues in Volume 5

NEXT VOLUME

MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

4

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